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HERSH ON JFK and the Missile Crisis

I, too, am very critical of JFK on the Missile Crisis. But that is because I set a much higher standard for presidential behavior and risk-taking than is set by most other historians or analysts, much higher than is set by the behavior of his fellow presidents.

By the standards I apply, other presidents do not merely fail as badly as JFK; many of them look much worse.

If it was acceptable, tolerable, to trade the Turkish missiles openly for the Soviet missiles on Cuba (and admit diplomatic parity with the Soviets)

i.e., if this was better than to invade, with its risk (actually much higher than JFK realized: one of the major flaws of his policy) of nuclear war, and its risk of prolonged, bloody conflict and occupation (again, much higher than JFK realized, pre-Vietnam; this was also true of the Bay of Pigs, had the CIA plan "succeeded" or had JFK followed the recommendations to rescue it from failure by all-out intervention, as Burke or Nixon and others proposed)...

was it not also better to make this trade than to take any significant risk of these developments?

(One must also ask, though: What would this victory for the Soviets have encouraged Khrushchev to do, "next"?)

Was he impelled more, in putting the missiles into Cuba, by

(a) anger and humiliation, at the Gilpatric speech, Berlin, Mongoose/invasion threats to Cuba and the Turkish missiles, or

(b) a sense of opportunity, low risk, because of JFK's performance at the Bay of Pigs, Vienna (Laos?). JFK seemed to think this, but Khrushchev and other Russians always denied it. If it was true, then giving him a great victory in the Missile Crisis might have encouraged further Soviet provocations.

But if not, if it was (a), then the victory and the parity could have made Khrushchev more secure and more ready to reach agreements (especially after the demonstration of JFK risk-taking in the blockade).

 Hersh's claim that the usual story of the Crisis is a myth because JFK's "victory" was really based on a trade, is highly misleading: First, stories of the Crisis have recognized the (secret) trade for a decade or so. Nothing new here.

Second, Hersh is erasing the difference between a secret trade and a public one. But there is all the difference in the world. It was the difference between a victory for JFK--which he won--and a victory for Khrushchev. A trade that effectively did remain secret for even two years was worthless for Khrushchev, part of his downfall. (And this one remained secret for 25 years!) Hersh's claim that the Crisis did not really end with a US victory is off the wall.

Indeed, one can ask: Was it "necessary" to the outcome for JFK to offer even this much? Given his state of information and mind on Saturday night, would he have acted differently (on Sunday morning) if RFK had totally rejected Dobrynin's probe and Khrushchev's Saturday morning letter proposing a trade, and said that the missiles would remain there?

I think not. Khrushchev was making a last effort to seize victory from defeat, on Saturday morning and on Saturday night, just as Kennedy was doing the same both times. Kennedy won. The underlying reality, which neither of them knew (as it applied to both of them) was that neither was willing to see an invasion happen. Each of them was prepared to accept the other's maximum terms to avert that.

Khrushchev folded first: because he knew (unknown to JFK) that events could move out of his control by first light, if Castro shot down a reconnaissance plane. JFK wasn't under the same pressure; he thought Khrushchev controlled Castro, and surely wouldn't permit him to do that, since it would be tantamount to forcing a US attack to occur as early as Saturday morning (before JFK had had time to fold, if he were going to). JFK saw no advantage to Khrushchev in doing that. RFK's warning was meant to ensure that Khrushchev understood that neither had any incentive to force events so soon.

Under this pressure, would Khrushchev have hesitated or bargained further if RFK had simply said, "The missiles are staying in Turkey"? Surely not; the secret trade obviously did virtually nothing for Khrushchev, and probably had no effect on Khrushchev's behavior at all. Without the pressure of Castro's antiaircraft firing, Khrushchev might well have waited till midday Sunday in hopes that JFK would accept the public trade after all; and those hopes would probably have been rewarded, reversing the outcome.

But neither antagonist knew this, for sure, or surely enough, about his opponent. The secret trade was not JFK's last offer (his statements to this effect, through RFK, were bluffs) nor was it critical or even helpful (as far as one knows) to Khrushchev's acceptance of JFK's terms. (Probably the offer of no-invasion was more helpful, perhaps even critical, since it appeared to meet Khrushchev's announced goal from the beginning. (The demand for a public trade of missiles had been added only Saturday morning).

Note that the no-invasion pledge, however much it may have helped Khrushchev and depressed the Cubans in Miami and the JCS, was never formalized or accepted by the US as binding, given the failure of the Soviets to permit full inspection. An invasion could have been projected or carried out later without fear of violating a clear-cut and binding pledge. What was LBJ's planning with respect to this? Or CIA, JCS, Cubans?

So the real surprise and secret of the Crisis (still little appreciated, even after Hersh, who makes little of it and doesn't cite the evidence for it) is JFK's secret willingness, even from the beginning, to make a public trade.

This would have reversed the outcome and strongly affected later events (how might it have affected the 1964 election? Might even a Goldwater have won? Would Khrushchev have stayed in office in 1964 and later? That might have been very good, in averting the subsequent arms race! How would it have affected Vietnam, under either JFK (probably even he couldn't then have gotten out, or failed to send in troops and bombing) or LBJ or Goldwater?)

His willingness even to contemplate this, and almost surely willingness to do it if necessary, is in fact strongly to JFK's credit. It is doubtful that either Nixon or LBJ, let alone Goldwater, would have acted this way. (Well, maybe LBJ, given his comments during the crisis: one of his better moments). Would Eisenhower? Maybe yes, maybe no. But not Nixon!

On the other hand, his awareness that this was doable and preferable from the beginning raises questions as to whether he could really justify taking the risks he did take, or the (lower) risks that he actually saw, in the blockade and in prolonging the crisis and the reconnaissance. And these questions would apply even if he hadn't been aware that this was a preferable outcome than invasion; he should have been aware of that, even if he hadn't been.

But this is to set a high standard, rarely raised or applied, higher than his rivals could pass. Granted, (even) McNamara could see it from the beginning, along with Stevenson (and Rusk?) But most of the others (McGeorge Bundy?) would have regarded the public trade as anathema, unthinkable.

This was especially true once a public challenge had been made. Nitze, secretly (as I know, but apparently no one else) was, with Rusk, initially prepared to avoid making a challenge, prepared to accept the missiles. But what would he have said once the challenge (the blockade, or stronger) had been made by the US? I don't know. Notice the (10%) risk of all-out nuclear war that he was willing to accept.